

Toll support weighed

Officials say study shows feasibility for Knoxville Parkway

By J.J. Stambaugh
Wednesday, February 20, 2008

State officials on Tuesday said they hope to gauge public support for turning the proposed Knoxville Parkway, also called the Orange Route, into Tennessee's first toll road and outlined a study that declares such a project feasible.

Ed Cole, who serves as the Tennessee Department of Transportation's environmental bureau chief, cautioned that the feasibility study doesn't say the state should build the hypothetical toll road, only that it can.

"No toll project will go forward unless we have local support," Cole told a packed meeting room at the Knoxville Chamber's downtown office.

Cole explained that the state Legislature has given TDOT the go-ahead to look at possible toll projects, hoping in part to offset the agency's dependence on increasingly tight tax dollars. Only two potential toll roads have been evaluated, he said, with the Parkway project being the only one to garner much support. The other possible road, an "intra-county parkway" in Sevier County, "didn't really pan out," he said.

The 26-mile Parkway under immediate consideration would connect Interstate 40 in Loudon County with Interstate 75 in Anderson County, but the study also envisions a 33-mile connector between I-75 in Anderson County and I-40 east of Knoxville, terminating east of Highway 66 in Sevier County.

If the Parkway is built as a toll road, current plans call for the estimated \$600 million price tag to be paid for with bonds rather than taxpayer dollars, which could move up the timetable appreciably because it would skip the normal appropriations process, Cole said.

The \$600 million price tag would only cover the eastern section of the Parkway from Loudon to Anderson counties, he said.

"This would happen faster simply because the money would happen earlier," he said.

Cole stressed that the study, which was prepared by Wilbur Smith Associates, is no more than an attempt to sound out the concept in anticipation of the future. "This is a change in the paradigm of traffic planning," he said.

The feasibility study assumes a 2020 opening date for the 59-mile-long project, which is called "State Route 475" in the report. The study's authors determined that a toll of 14.4 cents per mile to pay off the debt bond and maintain the road was reasonable, but Cole said the figure isn't set in stone.

A toll-financed Parkway wouldn't be privately owned or operated, he said, and one question that's yet to be answered is whether motorists will actually pay to use it.

Cole said the Legislature has mandated that toll roads can't be built "unless we have local support" and took several questions from the audience, whose members included local business leaders and government officials.

Knoxville City Councilman Joe Hultquist said after the meeting that he was at best lukewarm on the whole Parkway project, even though there are strong arguments that can be made for its construction. There are far too many other uses for the money, he said, to allow "\$600 million to be vacuumed up by this project."

"If the state's going to build the Parkway, possibly the only way I feel we can justify it is if we make it a toll road," he said.

The Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization's Executive Board is expected to vote on the toll road Feb. 27, according to Cole.

J.J. Stambaugh may be reached at 865-342-6307.

